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INFO RUEHZO/AFRICAN UNION COLLECTIVE

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 LIBREVILLE 000007

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/07/2019  
TAGS: PGOV PHUM PREL GB  
SUBJECT: GABON: DETAINED ACTIVISTS SCHEDULED FOR  
ARRAIGNMENT

REF: A. LIBREVILLE 002  
1B. LIBREVILLE 003

Classified By: Poloff Leslie Doumbia for reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

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Summary  
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11. (C) Seven persons detained in a crackdown on anti-corruption and anti-government activists were scheduled to be arraigned in a Libreville court on the afternoon of January 7. Details of potential charges against the detainees are not available. One of the detainees told us they are being held in deplorable conditions and sought international pressure for their release. The Minister of Interior defended the arrests and the process to date as consistent with Gabonese law. The Embassy is consulting intensively with other diplomatic missions, maintaining contact with those close to the detainees, and otherwise monitoring the situation. We have apprised the government directly but informally of our very strong concerns and will coordinate next steps with both the Department and local diplomatic missions. End Summary.

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No Charges Yet  
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12. (SBU) Marc Ona, perhaps Gabon's most prominent anti-corruption and anti-government campaigner, and six other persons were scheduled for arraignment before a Gabonese tribunal on the afternoon of Wednesday, January 7. Sources close to the detainees said they expected Ona and the others to be charged, though it is not clear yet what the charges will be. The Embassy will monitor the arraignment, likely to be held in a closed session, and report the outcome. If arraigned, the detainees are likely to be bound over to prison awaiting trial.

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"Deplorable" Conditions  
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13. (C) One detainee, NGO leader George Mpaga, managed a brief phone call to an Embassy employee at about mid-day on January 7. Mpaga pled for diplomatic and political support and claimed he and the others were being held with the regular population of those awaiting trial. He said conditions were deplorable and that there were approximately 40 prisoners crammed into a single small and dirty room.

14. (C) The detainees have obtained high-profile legal representation, including prominent French and Gabonese lawyers. The Ambassador is scheduled to meet with the defense legal team January 9. Meanwhile, we are in close consultation with French, EU and other diplomatic representatives, all of whom report strong interest in the case from their capitals.

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Government Response  
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¶ 15. (C) In addition to an informal demarche on Deputy Foreign Minister Nelson Messone (Ref. A), the Ambassador and her team will continue to reach out to all parties to urge fair treatment of the detainees and a fair and transparent legal process. Gabonese Minister of Interior Andre Mba Obame defended the government's handling of the case in an interview with Radio France International (RFI) January 7, and claimed it was not appropriate to discuss the basis of the investigation before formal charges are brought. Sources close to the detainees continue to assert that the government's actions represent retaliation for the involvement of Ona and others in exposés of President El Hadj Omar Bongo Ondimba's property holdings in France and allegations of corruption against Gabon's chief prosecutor, who is both Bongo's nephew and a key player in the ongoing legal drama.

¶ 16. (SBU) Ona and some of the other detainees have been involved in a variety of other controversial matters, including an ongoing teachers' strike which has shut Gabonese public schools for most of this academic year.

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Comment  
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¶ 17. (C) The detainees have been targeted because they have challenged the corruption at the heart of the political and

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economic system constructed during President Bongo's long reign. However, Bongo and his government are sensitive to international pressure. Following the results of the arraignment, Embassy will coordinate with Department on next steps and also work with Gabon's international partners.

End comment.

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